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# The Research Basis for *Writing Matters*

## A White Paper

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## Executive Summary

This paper outlines the research basis for *Writing Matters* (<http://www.writingmatters.org/>) – a middle school literacy program that combines best instructional practices with intensive staff development and 21st Century tools for learning. *Writing Next*, commissioned by Carnegie Corporation of New York and published by the Alliance for Excellent Education, offers an extensive meta-analysis of quantitative studies of writing. The report identifies a number of strategies that are most effective for improving the writing of grade 4 -12 students. *Writing Matters* is designed to effectively address these elements:

- ☑ Writing Strategies
- ☑ Summarization
- ☑ Collaborative Writing
- ☑ Specific Product Goals
- ☑ Word Processing
- ☑ Sentence Combining
- ☑ Prewriting
- ☑ Process Writing Approach
- ☑ Study of Models

The evidence-based program responds to a number of challenges to middle school literacy instruction — and is delivered in an appropriately paced, highly structured manner that sparks student creativity while engaging the most difficult-to-reach learners.

## Introduction

Middle schools across the country are struggling with improving literacy. Teaching Matters begins to address this challenge through *Writing Matters*. The program has a proven track record of serving the needs of today's diverse urban classrooms, providing just the right balance of new technology – so motivating to today's high tech teens – with rigorous curriculum in writing. In just a few short years, *Writing Matters* has been field-tested with thousands of students and their teachers.

At the core of this pioneering program is interactive, original content developed in collaboration with nationally recognized experts of effective writing including:

- ✚ **Heather Lattimer**: Author: *Thinking through Genre*. Editorials, short fiction, and feature articles expert.
- ✚ **Georgia Heard**: Author: *Awakening the Heart* among others. One of the nation's top poetry educators.
- ✚ **Janet Angelillo**: Author *Writing about Reading* among others. Literacy consultant throughout the US and Canada.

The curriculum's "balanced literacy" and "writer's workshop" methodologies are coupled with student engagement in the following ways:

Methods		Tactics
Authentic hands-on activities	➔	Writing for an audience
Technology-supported independent learning	➔	Targeted e-tutorials
Collaboration with others	➔	Sharing and getting peer/mentor feedback
Demonstration of exemplary work	➔	Publishing in a real electronic magazine

## Challenges to Literacy Instruction

Literacy is widely acknowledged as one of the most difficult subjects to teach and learn. Providing effective instruction for grade 6 – 8 students is challenging for a number of reasons including:

- **A significant number of new and inexperienced teachers**, with a greater likelihood of shortages occurring in low-income communities which have higher levels of educational need.
- **Uneven professional development**, leaving teachers with varied classroom experience and levels of expertise without deep instructional understandings and strategies.
- **Differentiated student learning needs** that include a range of cognitive abilities, learning styles and interests that must all be addressed within one classroom.
- **Lack of classroom resources** to motivate and fully engage students, offer unique opportunities to develop and demonstrate their writing skills, and monitor their progress.

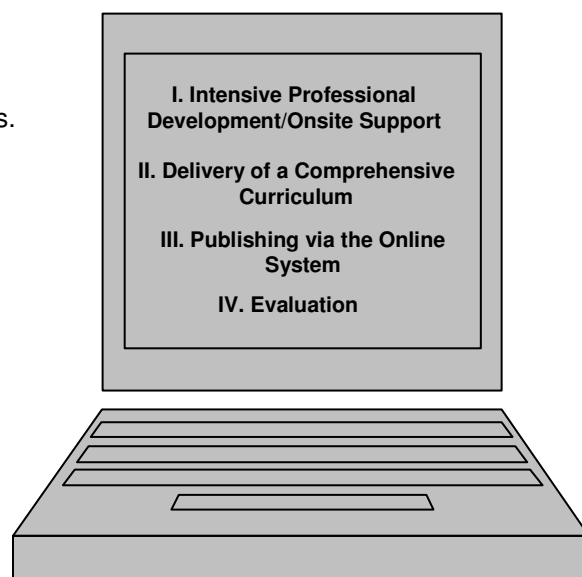
## The *Writing Matters* Solution

***I. Intensive Professional Development/Onsite Support:*** An institute is the first step in helping teachers to improve effectiveness in writing instruction. Professional developers then work one-on-one with participants in their own classrooms. Teachers are guided onsite through a six-week instructional process that engages students and prepares them to communicate effectively in writing. Technology is used as a vehicle for learning, motivation and dissemination of work.

***II. Delivery of a Comprehensive Curriculum:*** *Writing Matters* consists of eight genre-based units including editorials, memoir, and poetry among others. Each offers web resources, tutorials and tools to assign and receive student work and monitor progress. Students engage in activities including exploring topic ideas, reinforcing skills, preparing drafts, keeping track of assignments and publishing for a real audience. Technology use makes writing relevant to experience outside of school. Story-based animations help students to grasp the critical thinking behind effective writing. Events are also held to share and celebrate student work.

***III. Publishing via the Online System:*** Research repeatedly points to publishing as a beneficial and integral addition to writing programs. “Not only does publishing encourage students to write by creating purpose and vision, but it also serves to improve writing skills.” (Ensio & Boxeth 2000) An online system offers a safe space for writing and collaboration that is teacher tested and approved. Work is featured from a variety of genres (recordings can be attached). Students can also serve as key players in the publishing enterprise. In the past, they have worked with professionals on an editorial board that critiques and chooses work. They have also contributed as “e-respondents.” The online publishing system is available for free to schools across the country.

***IV. Evaluation:*** A three-year evaluation of *WM* is being conducted by The Center for Children and Technology (CCT). During the first year (2006 – 2007), formative (developmental) evaluation provided information about the strengths and weaknesses of the program from the point of view of the teacher and the learner. CCT recently initiated the two-year summative (overall impact) evaluation phase that will assess the value of this program in terms of teacher skill development and student learning. Evaluation data and instruments include samples of student work, surveys, focus groups and “think alouds.”



## Key Research Based Elements Driving *Writing Matters*

Key Elements of Effective Writing Instruction as Identified by Meta-Analysis	<i>Writing Matters</i> ' Alignment with Research Based Elements
<p><b>Writing Strategies</b> (Effect Size = 0.82)</p> <p>Teaching adolescents strategies for planning, revising, and editing their compositions has shown a dramatic effect on the quality of students' writing. Strategy instruction involves explicitly and systematically teaching steps necessary for planning, revising, and/or editing text.</p>	<p>Writers must carefully construct a piece of writing before it is ready to be published for an audience. Each unit includes a multi-step process of planning, organizing, drafting, revising, and editing. Examples include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Planning and organizing: Students are provided with organizers that allow them to generally structure the elements of their written pieces as well as visualize the key characteristics of the specific genre.</li> <li>➤ Revising: Students are provided with specific strategies for improving their drafts. Emphasis is also placed on the most relevant strategy for a genre. For example, Writing Editorials require revision for persuasion while Writing Short Fiction requires revision for consistency of character.</li> <li>➤ Editing: Students are given an editing checklist for every single unit to check their own work and to peer-edit.</li> </ul> <p>At each step of the writing process, students are not only encouraged to apply specific strategies but to recognize their effectiveness in the writing of their classmates via an online learning management system.</p>
<p><b>Summarization</b> (Effect Size = 0.82)</p> <p>Writing instruction often involves explicitly and systematically teaching students how to summarize texts.</p>	<p>Nonfiction units include specific instructions on note-taking and research. Once students do background research for expository and persuasive pieces of writing, they need to summarize this information to insure that they have synthesized its meaning before drafting. Nonfiction pieces of writing can then be constructed. As another example, in Response to Literature students must first demonstrate that they comprehend the text they plan to analyze prior to identifying and writing about key themes and supporting evidence.</p>
<p><b>Collaborative Writing</b> (Effect Size = 0.75)</p> <p>Collaborative writing involves developing instructional arrangements whereby adolescents work together to plan, draft, revise, and edit their compositions. It shows a strong impact on improving the quality of students' writing.</p>	<p>There are multiple opportunities at every step of the writing process for students to "share" (give ideas, get ideas) their work with classmates in person and in the online classroom. For example, in Writing Short Fiction students first develop a rich character from which their stories will emerge. They then share profiles to get feedback on whether the character they are developing is realistic and interesting. Students go on to develop story maps for their characters and "pitch" stories to each other. This type of peer feedback continues through every step of the writing process and serves as a valuable force in driving creativity and motivation.</p>
<p><b>Specific Product Goals</b> (Effect Size = 0.70)</p> <p>Setting product goals involves assigning students specific, reachable goals for the writing they are to complete.</p>	<p>Each unit helps students understand a different genre of writing and its real-world purpose, reviews examples and requires students to produce genre-based assignments by applying what they are learning to a self-selected topic. There are very clear expectations for each assignment:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Outcome: Writing is publishable in the <i>Writing Matters</i> ezine.</li> <li>➤ Content: Writing is clear and coherent, and contains the structure and characteristics associated with the genre under study. An editorial, for instance, must state an opinion, and build an argument by providing evidence, presenting the other side, refuting the other side, and stating a clear and strong conclusion and call to action.</li> <li>➤ Assessment: Writing meets criteria addressed in conferences and a rubric that states specific measurable benchmarks aligned with local and state standards.</li> </ul>

<p><b>Word Processing (Effect Size = 0.55)</b></p> <p>The use of word-processing equipment can be particularly helpful for low-achieving writers.</p>	<p>While students typically begin their pre-writing and planning process in physical writers' notebooks, final products are produced electronically with a word processor. Word processing tools encourage more experimentation in the drafting phase as well as deeper revision and editing practices. Additionally, students use word processing features to prepare for publishing online for a real audience.</p>
<p><b>Sentence Combining (Effect Size = 0.50)</b></p> <p>Sentence combining involves teaching students to construct more complex and sophisticated sentences through exercises in which two or more basic sentences are combined into a single sentence.</p>	<p>Every unit teaches grammar in the editing phase, in the context of students' own writing. Key lessons have been selected that present typical challenges for each genre. Sentence combining is emphasized in Response to Literature. Other grammar lessons include 'first vs. third person' is in Writing Short Fiction and quotes and quotation marks in Writing Memoir. Grammar lessons are free floating and can be incorporated by teachers across genres as needed.</p>
<p><b>Pre-writing (Effect Size = 0.32)</b></p> <p>Pre-writing engages students in activities designed to help them generate or organize ideas for their composition.</p>	<p>Pre-writing is emphasized at the beginning stages of every genre study to help students generate topics and explore their appropriateness as the focus of the piece of writing. A host of online resources, such as sample writers' notebooks and exemplars from our own online library (aka Prof. P's Office) further demonstrate how writers generate, collect and organize ideas. These resources also reinforce what has been introduced in the classroom to provide differentiated instruction for struggling writers.</p>
<p><b>Process Writing Approach (Effect Size = 0.32)</b></p> <p>The process writing approach involves a number of interwoven activities. Most important it is only effective when teachers received training in applying the model.</p>	<p>Each unit includes up to six weeks of lessons that guide students through a multi-stage writing process. Teachers are provided with significant training in this approach. They first attend a full-day institute in which they learn about the pedagogy by taking on the role of students and going through the process approach in an abbreviated fashion. At the institute, teachers write a creative piece as their students would. Classroom lessons made available in print and online provide a much deeper explanation of the multi-stage approach. Combined with onsite mentoring by a professional developer and online resources, teachers are guided all along the way in effective application of the process writing model.</p>
<p><b>Study of Models (Effect Size = 0.25)</b></p> <p>The study of models provides adolescents with good models for each type of writing that is the focus of instruction. Students are encouraged to analyze these examples and to emulate the critical elements, patterns, and forms embodied in the models in their own writing.</p>	<p>Students have the opportunity to critically analyze the elements, patterns and forms of multiple types of models throughout each unit:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Teachers: Model both writing processes and products.</li> <li>➤ Mentor Texts: Written by both adults and youngsters, offer powerful examples of effective process and outcomes.</li> <li>➤ Think alouds: Brief animations in which characters model their process for figuring out each part of the writing assignment.</li> <li>➤ Electronic notebooks: Show writing outcomes of the animated characters, correspond with the think aloud process presented in the animations.</li> </ul> <p>Students have the opportunity to share their best work with thousands of others via the online publishing system. These publications provide an abundance of good models of student writing.</p>

## Conclusion

*Writing Matters* (<http://www.writingmatters.org/>) was developed to address widespread challenges to effective literacy instruction including new and inexperienced teachers, uneven professional development, differentiated student learning needs, and lack of classroom resources. These challenges are met by combining an evidence based literacy curriculum, intensive staff development and supplemental web-based resources.

The program finds direct research support for its effectiveness in *Writing Next*, a report commissioned by Carnegie Corporation of New York and published by the Alliance for Excellent Education. Though meta-analysis, the report identifies key elements of instruction that improve 4<sup>th</sup> - 12<sup>th</sup> grade students' ability to learn to write well including:

- ☑ Writing Strategies
- ☑ Summarization
- ☑ Collaborative Writing
- ☑ Specific Product Goals
- ☑ Word Processing
- ☑ Sentence Combining
- ☑ Prewriting
- ☑ Process Writing Approach
- ☑ Study of Models

*Writing Matters'* technology enhanced literacy curriculum successfully incorporates all of the above elements. This pioneering approach to writing instruction has demonstrated benefits for thousands of middle school students and their teachers.